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ABSTRACT

Research has documented bias toward elderly clients by mental health professionals. To determine whether counselor trainees held similar biases against elderly clients, counseling (N=40) and non-counseling (N=25) graduate students were given an intake summary of a female client exhibiting symptoms of depression. The client's age was manipulated on the summaries by presenting the client as either 25, 45, or 65 years old. Subjects rated the clients on five dimensions, i.e., self-awareness, openness to change, self-esteem, duration of counseling, outcome of counseling, using a sevenpoint scale. Results indicated that the client's age did not significantly affect the ratings on any of the five dimensions. The results suggest that students do not show the same forms of client bias toward the aged as professionals. (Author/NRB)

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# Influence of Client Age on Counselor Trainees' Assessment of Case Materials

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Paper presented at the 34th Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society, Toronto, November 8-12, 1981. Requests for reprints should be addressed to either Paul E. Panek, Department of Psychology, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL, 61920, or Thomas V. Merluzzi, Department of Psychology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, 46556.

Recently, a number of investigations have reported negative views or attitudes by professionals from various mental health fields toward aged clients: clinical and counseling psychologists (O'Brien, Johnson, & Miller, 1979; Ponzo, 1978); social workers and lawyers (Ferrer & Miller, Note1); and, psychiatrists (Ford & Sbordone, 1980).

Since individuals who have already gained entrance into a profession manifest these biases, it would be a great importance to determine if individuals training for entrance into a health care profession hold these same negative views toward the aged. If they do, workshops, training experience, course work, and reading could be given to help alleviate these biases.

The purpose of the present investigation, therefore, was to investigate the influence of a client's age on counselor trainees' assessment of a client's (1) self-awareness, (2) potential behavior change, (3) self-esteem, as well as their assessment of the (4) duration, and (5) outcome of counseling.

## Method

Subjects. Participants were 65 graduate students ($n$ = 30 males; $n$ = 35 females) taking a first-year graduate counseling course at a midwestern state university. All were volunteers and studying for master's degrees in the various programs in the college of education.

Forty ($n$ = 16 males, $n$ = 24 females) were in the masters program in guidance and counseling psychology (Counselor Trainee Group).

As a control, twenty-five individuals ($n$ = 14 males, $n$ = 11 females) taking the same class, who were enrolled in the other master's programs in the college of education, participated in the experiment (Noncounselor's Group). None of the participants in either group were ever employed in a traditional counseling role.

Case Summary. Since depression is one of the most prevalent problems of the elderly (Epstein, 1976; Morris, 1976; Zung, 1967) a case summary describing a female client who was exhibiting symptoms of depression was devised and employed.[1] There were three case summaries which were identical except for the age of the client. One group of the subjects was informed the client was 25 yrs. of age; another, the client was 45 yrs., and finally, a third group was told the client was 65 yrs. of age. Therefore, the independent variable was the age of the client.

Rating Scales

A 5-item rating scale, which was scored from 1 to 7, representing a positive to negative dimension, was used as the dependent measure.[1] A scale score of 1 was assigned to the negative end of the scale, and a 7 to the positive end. These questions were as follows: 1.) With respect to self-awareness this person is: high in self-awareness (1)-to-low in self-awareness (7); 2.) This person's behavior is: very open to change (1)-to-very closed to change (7); 3.) With respect to self-esteem this person is: low in self-esteem (7)-to-high in self-esteem (1); 4.) This person would be a: short-term client (1)-to-long-term client (7); 5.) Counseling with this client would result in a: negative outcome (7)-to-positive outcome (1).

Procedure

Subjects received a packet containing one case summary. These packets were distributed at random. Subjects were informed they would be participating in an in-class counseling intake simulation, and to answer the five (5) items for the client.[1]

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A 3 (age of client) x 2 (Counselor trainee vs. Non-Counseling) x 2 (sex of rater) analysis of variance was conducted separately for each of the five questions.

Data analysis failed to obtain any significant difference on any of the five questions for the main effects of client age, major of rater, and sex of rater. Additionally, no significant interactions were obtained.

Though there is some inherent danger in interpreting non-significance, the importance of these findings was the obtained non-significance. That is, subjects were not affected by clients age to the point of influencing their ratings of them. Additionally, these findings are quite different from those which were based on individuals who function at the professional level (Ferrer & Miller, note 1; Ford & Sbordone, 1980; Granick & Kleban, note 2). It appears that students do not manifest the same forms of client bias toward the aged that professionals do. Perhaps, professionals develop biases toward various client groups with experience, or lack of experience, with them.

The results suggest the need for a cross-sectional or longitudinal study to assess the attitudes of mental health professionals at various levels of professional development. If there is, in fact, a socialization process whereby mental health professionals learn biases, perhaps a pattern in attitudinal data would uncover that process.

Also, there may be a lack of correspondence between attitudinal data about the elderly and what actually occurs in the counseling process. Finally, it would be interesting to compare the evaluations of novice counselors such

as those in this study with experienced counselors to observe any potential differences in evaluations of the elderly.

Overall, results suggest the need for further research concerned with the attitudes and views of students and professionals toward older clients.

## Reference Notes

note 1 Ferrer, D., & Miller, R. Professional and age related attitudinal conflicts of Social Workers and Lawyers. Paper presented at the 32nd Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society. November, 1979.

note 2 Granick, S., & Kleban, M.H. Influence of age and IQ on relationship among psychological and psychiatric judgments. Paper presented at the 32nd Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society. November, 1979.

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Zung, W.W.K. Depression in the normal aged. Psychosomatics, 1967, 8, 287-292.


## Footnotes

[1]note: These materials are available from either author at addresses indicated for reprint requests